

Issues and Choices in Campus Ministry Evaluation

by Allan J. Burry

Campus Ministry Section,
United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry

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There is probably no more vexing topic on the agenda of campus ministry these days than evaluation. We have a host of problems before us in ministry in higher education. We need funds. We need new ways to study the Bible. We need a rebirth of passion for justice. We need patterns of ministry for commuter colleges. These needs are important.

But, if I read the times correctly, we have *immediate* and *urgent* need for clarity on how we evaluate campus ministry itself.

Boards of higher education and campus ministry committees ask whether or not their present strategies for ministry are valid. They ask whether funds are being spent wisely and fairly. Campus ministers and local boards are increasingly engaged in serious self-study, seeking clarity about their ministry.

At issue here are matters of shape and purpose of ministry, the theological convictions upon which ministry is based, and our vision of the church in mission. At the same time, dollars will be given or not given, programs will be funded or not funded as a result of the evaluation of campus ministry.

All who care for campus ministry want evaluation to go beyond the familiar "numbers reached" criterion as the sole measure for judgment, looking instead at a broader picture of ministry.

Two Aspects of Evaluation

Just as we know in our hearts that evaluation is necessary, I would hope we also know that evaluation always takes place. It goes on all the time by diverse people and groups. We do not face the question of whether or not we will have evaluation.

Rather, we face the issue of how we get it done and what criteria we will use.

Evaluation must concern itself with the *effectiveness* of our ministry, including the extent of our contact with students. At the same time, our ministry must be tested against the criteria of *faithfulness*. We are at colleges and universities to work carefully and well on behalf of the church and on behalf of the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ.

God is not served through incompetence and ineffective ministry. However, competent programs which do not witness to the reign of God in our lives serve lesser goals than those to which we are called. Our criteria for evaluation must raise issues of both *effectiveness* and *faithfulness*.

No one would be willing to argue for the church's support for either ineffective or faithless ministries. Why, then, is evaluation such a perplexing problem for us? The major issue is the difficulty of discovering commonly shared *criteria* for judgment.

I find it useful to base the need for evaluation in a theological assumption. For me the need for evaluation is grounded in convictions about baptism and the body of Christ. In baptism, we are joined in a new and fundamental way with all those other Christians who are the church. The church as the body of Christ incorporates diverse individuals into an organic whole. We belong together, we need each other, and we share a common mission and ministry. [Ed.: We remind readers that the author is working from Methodist assumptions about baptism, but even Baptists share a common mission.]

This means that we need to share our visions of our work, our calling, our ministry. We need the support of each other. We need the critique that each can offer the other. Since we share a common mission, we share a common commitment to an effective and faithful ministry.

Each of us within the Christian community has something important at stake in the discussions of evaluations, and because there are important stakes involved, it is a difficult assignment we have.

The Process of Evaluation

A major part of our confusion about evaluation occurs at the point of *process*. Who is to *do* the evaluation?

In United Methodist circles, campus ministry partners include local boards, conference boards, local church pastors and members, university faculty and staff, district superintendents, bishops, conference staff, campus ministers, and, in some places, other denominations. With such a diverse cast in our drama, it is little wonder that we get and send confusing signals about evaluation. Each of these categories contains individuals with differing views and commitments.

To use the body image again, the right hand may not know what the left hand is doing. Perhaps more pointedly, it may know precisely what that hand is doing and not like it at all! A body so divided in opinions and desires may find it difficult to coordinate its movements, and not be able even to walk, much less to run the good race.

If there is *clarity* about the evaluation process, care can be taken to include the legitimate concerns of all parties involved in evaluation. *Confusion* about process can very easily lead to manipulation, to paranoia, power plays, and to arbitrary actions. When this occurs, the body of Christ is shamed, and Christ is crucified anew. I do not intend to suggest that legitimate authority and responsibility are not lodged someplace. But the ways that authority and responsibility exercised are deeply theological concerns, bespeaking our love for each other, our dependence on each other, and our devotion to the ministry of Christ which we share. It is crucial that careful attention be given to the *process* of evaluation.

Ministry Choices and the Evaluation Process

To be engaged in ministry inescapably involves choices about those to whom we minister and choices about the shape and scope of ministry.

Who are those we should serve? Does a ministry serve, in the first instance, the church? Is its target audience, as we have traditionally affirmed, those young men and women who have come to the university from church youth groups, who have a background of faith, who want to be with each other in fellowship and Christian nurture?

If the answer is "yes," then certain programmatic decisions follow, and specific criteria for evaluation can be put in place to judge that ministry's effectiveness.

Alternatively, one can make other choices. There are other

ways of understanding mission. Christ said those who would seek to save their own lives will surely lose it. This caution from Christ can be applied to institutions and campus ministries as well.

A ministry unit might choose as its primary target audience those in higher education and in society who are hungry, in prison, strangers, those to whom Christ referred in Matthew, those who know no denominational lines and may have no church history. Christ's command in John, "Feed my sheep" is a broad mandate for ministry. Again, appropriate criteria can be applied for an evaluation of this kind of ministry.

I don't want to set up a caricature or to set particular visions of ministry in competition with each other. But, in the selection of the target audience of those for whom we exist, of those with whom we minister, we have a serious choice to make which reflects itself in criteria for evaluation. We need to be clear about that choice.

Considerations in Choices About the Target Audience

It will not do to say that we should be all things to all people. There is no religious group, no local church, no denomination that appeals to everyone. We are inevitably involved in choice. This is not, for most of us, an *arbitrary* choice. It is a choice that is based in conviction. What will our choice be?

If we do not make a conscious choice, two consequences follow. First, most of our campus ministry units will find the clientele served will be white, traditional-aged, church-related students. Second, confusion will occur on the grounds for evaluation if programmatic attention is given to any constituency or issues which lie beyond this norm.

Our choice of constituency needs to be informed by careful demographic studies. Who are the people? How old are they? How much time do they spend here? What are their needs? We must have a choice informed by an understanding of the people and place where we minister.

We must also make important choices based on *place*, the location of ministry. What does it mean that we are ministers in *higher education*, that colleges and universities are our locations for ministry? We are commissioned by the church to be in higher education, to tend that arena on behalf of the church.

We can see better the importance of our place of ministry

when we remember that the church's ministry in a retirement home is not the same as a ministry at a youth camp. Inner-city work is not the same as a rural ministry. To be sure, people are people. We all have basic needs for love and support. We all need to grow, to meet challenges, to be affirmed in our lives. But, it is clear that the places where our constituents live and the particular forms of their lives and work are important in shaping the ministry we perform.

As we think about models of work, new patterns of organizing ourselves, I urge that we pay attention to the fact that our people are *students* and that we discover what that means. We in the church are not as skilled as we might be in addressing the *vocational* questions of our people. In many local congregations, we don't adequately examine the question, "What does it mean to be a businessperson, or a school teacher, or a clerk, or a secretary?" What are the particular kinds of needs that arise for people from the setting of their life and work? We are not skilled at looking at the vocational component of people's lives. When a person is at a college or university, there are particular pressures, issues, concerns, stresses, and intellectual questions that come. I want to hold out for *particularity of place* for our students and for our ministry.

It is becoming increasingly the practice in churches to group together all persons 18-25 years old, calling them "young adults." This assumes that *age* is the most important determinant of who these people are, and that their vocation does not significantly impact their development, their faith journeys, or their sense of personal identity. In this understanding, all 18-25 year olds are essentially the same.

I believe this pattern of thought is a mistake. Where a person spends his/her time, where one works, where one lives, what demands are placed on one's mind—all these factors have significant bearing on the particular form one's life takes and the nature of the faith questions one is seeking to answer. I understand the emergence of part-time students, people who visit campuses to take a course. But I still insist that we take the vocation of student seriously, even on a commuting campus.

Style, Content, and Evaluation

I want now to look at style and content of ministry. I've been saying to people recently, "Show me your program, and I'll show you your theology." If you look at the totality of a

program, you have a clue to the operational theology of the people who are making those ministry decisions. You get a sense of what's important, and you can also extrapolate some theological convictions:

There are all sorts of content possibilities. The one that most Wesley Foundations and ecumenical units are familiar with is the *activities* ministry. In that model, you do cook-outs, discussion groups, forums, Sunday-night suppers, and spiritual life weekends. It is often a collection of a wide range of activities. This model is essentially popular and safe. Nobody will raise many questions about a program which incorporates a little something for everybody. It is, in the main, quite meaningful for a number of folk. It has strengths. It meets some human need.

Secondly, there are *liturgically-based* units, most often found with the Episcopalians, the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics. In this model, the liturgy is the central act of ministry, the base line, with programmatic activities having secondary importance.

Thirdly, there are *counseling* ministries, where staff address individual crises of the spirit and crises of the psyche as they minister to human hurt.

Fourthly, there are ministries that focus on issues of *social justice*. Over the last several decades, campus ministry has been the locale for much work on social issues, much of which was controversial. The image lingers in the church's memory of those times. For most places, it is a memory only. Controversy has been replaced by a socially acceptable justice ministry of hunger campaigns, soup kitchens, blood drives, and volunteer work with United Fund agencies. But some units still focus on nuclear arms, Central America, and poverty.

Finally, there is the *academic* or *teaching* model, where people emphasize the development of faith communities that are academically informed. They will often also engage the academic community in conversations which are faith-informed.

In listing models which emphasize activities, liturgies, counseling, issues, and teaching, the concern is not to discover which one of those is important. All are important. The issue is the *relative* importance for *each* of them in relationship to the others and in relationship to the particular locale, circumstances, and people with whom one is working. The list has to do with *choices* and *the setting of goals*. Our conflicts for

evaluation occur when we have differing constituencies with competing goals coupled with no process for making decisions and choices. To do some things and not to do others, based on informed choice, should be part of the design of ministry.

We make choices, but sometimes our choices are unexamined or not made openly with our constituencies. These choices affect what it is that we are doing, how we deploy our resources, with whom we relate, to whom we address ourselves, and with whom we work in partnership. We must be as clear as possible about the choices we make and the grounds for those choices.

It is in the setting of our goals, the making of the required choices, and the building of consensus among our varying constituencies that we develop the criteria for evaluation of ministry. We choose, clearly and explicitly, the forms of our mission.

Our mission and ministry then become something that we can give ourselves to, and can support, and can become accountable for. Otherwise we find ourselves caught in a cross-fire, sniped at, hamstrung or underfunded because people don't approve our priorities or the way those priorities are being implemented. We must have greater clarity in our setting of goals, in the development of constituency building, and ways for us to handle conflicts between constituencies.

Dimensions of Faithfulness

As noted earlier, evaluation of campus ministry takes into account that this is a ministry on behalf of God and on behalf of God's church. Further, our ministry must be faithful to those to whom and with whom we minister. We turn now to look at the ways we are called to be faithful.

Faithfulness to God: Our first mandate is for faithfulness to God, faithfulness to the love and redemption made available to us through Jesus Christ.

Campus ministry is called to be a community of love and caring where God's love is mediated, where people are affirmed. We are to be the community where a word of hope is spoken at a time when many people sense only truncated futures if they sense any futures at all. We are to be a community of hope.

We are a community of forgiveness. We are a community of justice. We are a community that has to struggle always against

idolatry, of letting some other kind of goal or mission take the place of our faithfulness to God.

Faithfulness to the Church: A second concern of faithfulness has to do with faithfulness to the church. Sometimes it seems that the church has not appreciated campus ministry sufficiently; sometimes it has been enormously good and gracious to us. We're called to be faithful to our church, I believe, even when the appreciation level seems to be low.

There are legitimate claims of the institutional church on our work. Those legitimate claims include leadership training for the next generation of the church, education in the faith, and some kind words for the church's caring about campus ministry.

We should love the church enough to serve its mission in higher education—the job that we are sent to do.

We're not trying to do everything, not trying to be the local church all over again, but to do that job which is ours to do. We are faithful to the church when we have our own institutional integrity. What is it that we are to be doing? We are to minister on behalf of the church *in higher education*, with the students, faculty, administrators, and staff which make up our constituency.

Faithfulness to those to whom we minister: Here, I begin at the point of incarnation. For me, the incarnation means *specificity* in ministry. Christ came to a time, a people, a place—and Christ's incarnation informs our understandings of our times, our places, and our people. God's gesture of specificity means for us, I believe, that we take this time, and this place, and these people with a stringent seriousness. Sometimes we don't do that. We are tempted to treat students as we think they ought to be, or faculty as we think they ought to be, or the university as we think it ought to be. But our focus must be *this* time, *this* place, as a mark of faithfulness to God.

Recall Pope John XXIII's words displayed at the entrance of the Vatican Pavilion at the New York's World's Fair: "First let the world know the church loves it." To be faithful to those *to whom* we minister and *with whom* we minister means not manipulation, not seeking to serve ourselves, our institutional needs or goals, but to serve their needs and to care enough to be open to hear what they tell us.

Some years ago a slogan in church circles affirmed that the

world sets the agenda for the church. There is a certain amount of truth in the affirmation that the world is where we work, that the world is where needs are expressed. There's a dangerous part of that slogan too, if we say, "All we are here to do is to meet the needs which you verbalize to us."

We need to capture the truth of the saying that the world sets the agenda for the church. We need to know where people hurt, where crises are, where injustice is, where human spiritual needs are. At the same time the church has to maintain its own integrity in the presentation of its central message. As we listen and act with integrity, we can keep faith with those with whom we minister.

Faithfulness to and for the campus minister: In the midst of seeking to remain faithful to God, to the church, and to those to whom we minister, it is easy to overlook faithfulness to and for the campus minister.

Campus ministry can produce great stress for those called to this work. A recent study has shown that the largest factor in reducing stress is not job prioritizing or time management, but the attitude of the person or persons who supervise one's work.

In a campus ministry setting, this means that members of local and conference boards, cabinet members, and conference staff must attend to the care and nurture of the staff. Goals for ministry must be realistic. Evaluations must be fair. Time must be allowed for spiritual and intellectual life. Vacations must be honored. And all of this needs to be accompanied by regular and sensitive communication.

For those who are in campus ministry, there is the special need to look to one's own health, spiritual life, and family responsibilities. Even a deep commitment to Christ and to the church can become serious unfaithfulness. This happens when one's work assumes such overriding importance that basic human relationships become twisted and personal hurt replaces the fulfillment promised in the gospel.

All persons, clergy and lay, are called to sacrificial service and commitment to others. This Christian calling is rich, rewarding, and responsible. We honor that calling when we seek to live its claims. We dishonor the calling when we confuse continuous long hours and stress with selfless service.

To achieve proper balance between conscientious work and

personal nurture, campus ministers need loving critique. A ministry board must be that source of critique and the campus minister must be open to those conversations. An important task facing each ministry is the development of a context for critique which can be nourishing and sustaining both for the work and for those doing the work.

Thus, an important criterion for evaluation of ministry is the degree to which such a context for critique exists and is exercised. This evaluation criterion measures the effectiveness and faithfulness not only of a local ministry but also of the quality of caring and support offered to a ministry by wider church agencies and authorities.

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As Richard Yeager has noted in another context, John Wesley has given us a three-step evaluation process in his sermon "The Catholic Spirit" when he wrote:

"... (F)irst love me . . . secondly, commend me to God in all thy prayers . . . thirdly, *provoke me to love and to good works*. Second thy prayer, as thou has opportunity, by *speaking to me, in love*, whatsoever thou believest to be for my soul's health. *Quicken me* in the work which God has given me to do, and *instruct me* how to do it more perfectly Oh speak and spare not, whatever thou believest may conduce, either to the amending my faults, the strengthening my weakness, the building me up in love, or the making me more fit, in any kind, for the Master's use!"

In loving each other, praying for each other, and in offering each other words of counsel and correction, we strengthen the ministry we share.